

J. Stephen Rhodes

Economics

The first mornings of my first job I see
how different our white brick house is from theirs—
rundown porches that dangle broken stairs
onto Nelson Street and Techwood. While we
drive to my father's business each day,
I look at him and ask myself what deal
is involved, what unwritten principle.
A click of the tongue is all he might say.
Neither of us look at the other, his hand
on the wheel, mine in my lap. Outside, men
pass a brown paper bag, an omen
of unsteady peace we can't understand,
a sign of our unequal station.
Neither of us is up to the question.

Neither of us is up to the question,
so we plunge into the day and dismiss
the gap between home and work—stickiness—
as if closing your eyes makes you virgin
again. My father strides to his glass walls
while I slip to the stockroom where Roger
is bragging about his night with a whore
eating bananas while he was in thrall,
to the Monday morning joy of Leslie,
Oscar, and Jack, my new-appointed clan,
who have now pronounced that I am *the man*,
at thirteen—*boss's* son, crowned easily.
The black patriarch calls me Mr. Steve,
a status I don't know how to receive.

A status I don't know how to receive
becomes a mystery I can't comprehend
each week—an envelope of bills I spend
as I wish, suddenly off childhood's leash,
without rent to pay, or loan sharks. No boss,
at least that I can discern or admit,
except for my father, whose face is split,
Picasso-like, between grim and serious.
I can buy whatever I want. Nothing
like the late bus, landlords I hear about,
broken teeth and cars, currencies of doubt.
In my calculus, dread comes from dreaming
not a lack. Having much is the riddle,
unlike that of my new friends' too little.

Unlike that of my new friends' too little,
my job is designed as a teaching game
in my dad's economics, with the aim
of showing me ropes, firming my mettle,
and enshrining in my mind the dollar—
its girth, its weight, and sacramental
meaning, being a holy, visible
sign of invisible worth. My father
explains: A one-spot is not real, but rather
the market's homage to a person's trust,
a show of faith that societies must
have for people to survive together.
While my father rarely expresses zeal,
the greenback shines bright for what is most real.

The greenback shines bright for what is most real—
a balance of trade, a quid for each quo,
he says, though I see we can come and go,
where Jack and Oscar can't. Something's unequal
about the scales, making the caustic grace
for the boss's son less blessing than curse.
My new friends become my nighttime's new ghosts:

The patriarch plants a smile on his face
in an economy of polite lies
I have no clue for how to navigate.
I do my dance, sing along with my fate,
listening to discordant melodies,
one foot in our red-shuttered, white brick home,
one foot in what I'm programmed to become.

One foot in what I'm programmed to become,
I divide into the stockroom bat boy
and—learning from peers—trash-talking bad boy.
The fresh-faced kid flies away with no home,
that part of me like cardboard planes I cut
from stock and launch out the warehouse window.
You're a tough age, my father says. *You'll grow
past this*, as if I could keep my eyes shut
some day. I wonder what he himself sees
driving to work, or in a stockroom face.
He looks like he's longing for a safe place
so much that he watches his employees
with one eye, the other on the future,
his job in life to see the big picture.

His job in life to see the big picture
means he lives ahead of the rest of us,
loses sleep, carries his worries close—
spends weekends over his calculator.
To me he is a silent mystery
when we drive home with the radio off.
Unasked questions bounce off the Chevy's roof.
It's pointless to press my inquiry
too far, since to untie even one knot
might unravel the underlying net
that, holding our family up, won't let
us loose without our house falling apart.
Silence seems the best way to live safely
the first mornings of my first job, I see.